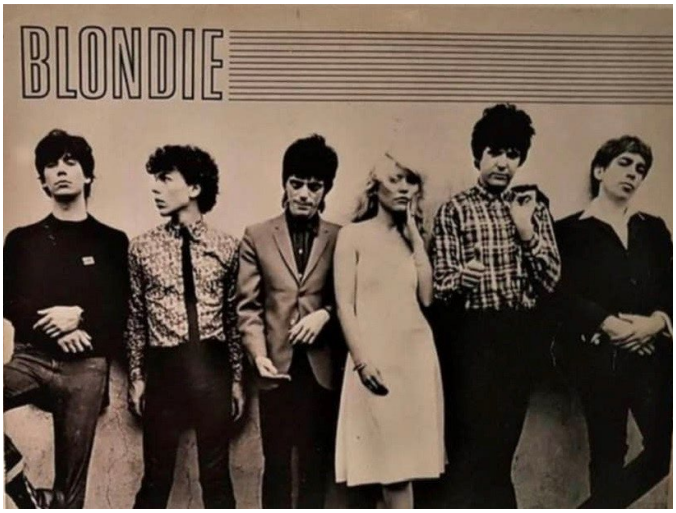
“Parallel Lines”—Blondie (1978)

Added to the National Registry: 2024
Essay by Daniel Bukszpan (guest post)*



Blondie

“Parallel Lines” is the third full-length album from New York City’s Blondie. It was released in 1978, and it showed that new wave music--which had been anathema to popular sensibilities just a few years earlier--was a commercial force to be reckoned with.

Formed in 1974 by singer Deborah Harry and guitarist Chris Stein, Blondie was never an all-the-way punk rock band, although their first two albums, “Blondie” and “Plastic Letters,” were raw and unpolished enough that the band sounded like they had just left New York City’s CBGB stage the night before. Still, they were already pop-informed enough even in their earliest days that no one would mistake them for the Exploited.

The band had come up sharing stages with bands like the Ramones. Blondie had never shared that band’s love of chainsaw guitars and abrupt songs that struggled to reach the two-minute mark, but in both cases, there was an ability to harness the norms of bubblegum pop music and use them in a raw, no-frills context. Even their 1976 self-titled debut album kicked off with “X Offender,” a song that could have been punk if Harry’s quite agreeable voice hadn’t been so pleasing to the ear.

After their second album, “Plastic Letters,” the band started working with new producer Mike Chapman. He had previously worked with The Sweet and Suzi Quatro, so he was already well-versed in working with hard-rocking artists with Brill Building songwriting instincts that needed to be coaxed out of them.

Prior to working with Chapman, Blondie had followed a garage-band/demo-tape approach to recording, otherwise known as doing one take and living with the results. Chapman kept them doing takes until the songs came out right. This was not a simple thing at first--he said the sessions got stressful in part because of him pushing for take

after take, and he alleged that bassist Nigel Harrison at one point in the proceedings threw a synthesizer at him.

When “Parallel Lines” eventually emerged in September 1978, it had a slick sheen that would have sent Sid Vicious into cardiac paroxysms. Needless to say, the band became the target of “sellout” accusations.

Those accusations weren’t necessarily wrong. “Parallel Lines” topped the UK album chart, went to number two in Australia and Canada, and peaked at number six on the US “Billboard” chart. Furthermore, the album featured “Heart of Glass,” a song with such undeniable disco leanings that an early version of it was unofficially named “The Disco Song.” For a new wave band in 1978 who had shared stages with Television and Patti Smith, this was heresy.

If “Heart of Glass” had been consciously written to capitalize on the disco fad, the “sellout” accusation might have carried some weight. In reality, it wasn’t even a new song. It dated back to the group’s earliest days and went through multiple permutations before becoming the song we all know and love today. Harry said in the “Guardian” in 2013 that producer Mike Chapman helped to get it to that point.

“'Heart of Glass' was one of the first songs Blondie wrote, but it was years before we recorded it properly,” she said. “We'd tried it as a ballad, as reggae, but it never quite worked.”

It was presented to Chapman when he asked them to play all the songs they intended to put on the new record. They obliged, and then he asked them if they had any other songs in reserve. They gave him an airing of “The Disco Song.”

“He liked it,” Harry said. “He thought it was fascinating and started to pull it into focus.”

“Parallel Lines” had a lot going for it besides just that one song. The album cover is one of the most visually-striking LP jackets of the 1970s, and that was a decade full of visually-striking LP jackets. It consists of a minimalist shot of the band, all clad in dark suits and ties except for Harry, who’s clad in a white spaghetti-strap dress. Set against the backdrop of actual monochromatic parallel lines, it was a record cover that caught your eye, even from all the way across the record store.

The music inside the jacket was a smart mix of hard-hitting rock and roll that didn’t have much else to compare to. “Hanging on the Telephone,” “One Way or Another,” and “Picture This” start the record with different spins on downtown Noo Yawk attitude, mixed with just enough studio polish to make it sound clear. Those songs were so immediately embraced by radio listeners that no one even seemed to notice that “One Way or Another” was the story of an ex-boyfriend of Harry’s who couldn’t take a hint.

The record is not perfect and sadly features a couple of duds. The ballad “Fade Away and Radiate” feels completely out of place here, along with “Pretty Baby.” “I Know But I

Don’t Know” is a strong finish to side one, and side two begins with “11:59,” whose Farfisa organ gives it some overlap with Squeeze in a few places. “Will Anything Happen,” which is sadly buried in the middle of side two, is a really energetic exercise that flirts with punk but is again performed with too much musicianship to qualify.

As good as most of the material on “Parallel Lines” is, the star of the show is “Heart of Glass.” It was released as a single in January 1979, and by then it was customary to hear the song in roller rinks, on pop radio, and in other mainstream contexts where punk rock was never going to get an airing.

It’s important to stress that according to a lot of people who were around at the time, punk was already over by that point, and even its fans were starting to get more interested in new sounds. Blondie gave them those new sounds at exactly the right time, but they had not sold out to make that happen. The mainstream had come to them.
It's difficult to overstate the importance of this record and the influence it had on music at the time. Simply put, Blondie brought punk-influenced music to the mainstream, and its mix of styles has continued to influence artists across multiple genres from pop to electronic music to indie rock. It remains a useful 39-minute lesson in how to wield underground sounds and gain mainstream appeal at the same time.

Daniel Bukszpan is a writer with 30 years of experience. He is the author of “The Encyclopedia of Heavy Metal” (2003, Barnes & Noble), “The Encyclopedia of New Wave” (2012, Sterling Publishing), “The Art of Brütal Legend” (2013, Udon Entertainment), “Woodstock: 50 Years of Peace and Music” (2019, Charlesbridge Publishing), “Ozzy at 75” (Motorbooks, 2023), and “Rush at 50” (Motorbooks, 2024). He has also written articles for such publications as CNBC, “Fortune,” and The Daily Beast.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.